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PER ASPERA AD ASTRA

A COLLECTION OF POEMS

BY

ALEXANDRA VON HERDER



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To T. de Gunthe

*On the dawn of the day of your marriage,
Others will bring you their gold,
Their jewels, their gems and their silver—
My hands this book only hold,
This fragment—but suffer its pages
To mirror the light of your soul,
And the greatest of human treasures
Will gild and transfigure the scroll.*



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ASPERA



Marcus Aurelius on His Death Bed in the Roman
Camp at Vindobona, during His Campaign
against the Marcomans, March, A. D., 180

Draw close the curtains of my tent—they're cold
Those cruel winds of March. How is it with me?
Disease enthral's me wholly and there is that
Within me whispers death itself is close
At hand. What, tears? Nay, nay that is rebellion
Against a greater prince than I. If He,
Who sent me here, now bids me go, what cause
Is there for sorrow? Let Him be satisfied—
What would ye more? Ye murmur that He called
Too soon! How should ye know? Is mortal man—
Who in the boundless stretch of time discerns
But one small point, the time that is; who owns
No magic spell wherewith to bind the least
Swift second of the past, no vision's breadth
Wherewith to scan the mighty aeons still
Unborn; who, hardly longer than t'wixt dawn
And sunset crawls out life upon the clod,
The narrow clod he calls his world,—is he
Fit arbiter of what is truly termed
"Too soon or late"? It is the will of Fate
To set a term to whatsoever once
Began; Death is the common lot of all,
As natural as birth and growth, less strange,
Less terrible than life. What room were there
For youth, if age endured for ever? Men die
So that mankind may live. Mark well the book
Of Nature. Does it not show the breaking wave
Dissolve without a sigh upon the shore,
The rose shed silently its purple crown,
The ripened olive drop unmurmuring
Unto the ground; and these are soulless things.
Shall man who has a soul to comprehend,
Whose spirit is akin to God's, alone
Revolt against the universal scheme?
Consider, too, how little happiness
Mere length of days adds to the mind. I've seen
Men rich in years, so poor in everything
That lendeth grace and worth to life, they moved
My heart to pity; and if I thus perceived
That all that signifies is not how long,
But how a human being lives, I learnt
As well, that this most fragile particle
Of mind and matter, man, whom sixty years

Of fleeting time drain dry of all his power,
Was scarcely fashioned to endure the blaze
Of God's Eternity. Our fear of death
Is but an appetite for longer life,
And like all appetites will lead astray
When uncontrolled by reason. O Universe,
From whom all things proceed, in whom they all
Subsist, and unto whom all must return,
If 'tis for thy good that I yield up life,
Let no one murmur at my death. So soon,
The mourners are as still and cold as those
They wept for in their bitterness. To-day
I die, to-morrow thou; and shortly all
Who ever knew us, hating us or loving,
Are vanished like a little smoke, and then
This beauteous world, in which we laughed, and hoped
And toiled, will scarce remember where our graves
Are slowly crumbling into dust. My God!
That cruel pang again. How fluently
We talk of sickness and calamity,
While all is well, but gripped by adverse fate
It needeth much philosophy to repress
The cry of pain; and thou art weeping? Still?
Ah Fronto, noble friend, I know there are
Some griefs, to which the loftiest arguments
Of reason seem as cold a consolation
As for the burdened body is this bleak
Barbarian land; and lately—but may be
My body's fever bursting bounds, has seared
The soul—a doubt, a gnawing doubt, chill, blank,
Dissolving as the autumnal mists, which creep
And cling among these marsh girt northern woods,
Has overcast my inmost thoughts,—a doubt
That in the changeful flux of Fate all things
Not always alter for the best, that man
Is to the great Creative Force no more
Than is the lump of clay unto the potter,
Who, even as he lists, will mould of this
A statue, of that a mean and paltry jar,
To be despised or honoured, used and crushed
To pieces, according to no higher law
Than the accident of chance; yea that our soul
Itself, is but a lightning flash of reason
Which, for an instant, burns 'midst vortices
Of senseless atoms, lost within the womb
Of night. A giddy thought! My teachers taught
Not so, and I would fain still twine my dreams
Round their belief, my worship round their altars,

Around their confidence my hopes; fain, fain,
But that I fear it is the cowardice
Of weakness thus to cling to hearsay creeds,
Instead of gazing out with mine own eyes
And with that steadfast boldness which, indeed,
Is the only real reverence, far out
Into Creation's Mystery. How oft
I tried to fill the silence, wherewith God
Still answers man's impatient questionings,
With guidance of a teacher's voice—in vain!
If truth demands, we must unflinchingly
Discard beliefs, which strain and split 'neath weight
Of fuller knowledge, yea e'en though its stern
Command destroy, with scarcely a regret
For their lost beauty, all those sweet illusions,
Those threads of golden poetry, that hid
And bridged the dark abyss of the unknown.
Yea, truth is stern and pitiless, but who
Shall say if, in the centuries to come,
When less constrained by blinding use and custom,
Mankind shall not at last discern how far
The strong perfection of reality
Transcends the painted beauty of its dreams?
Yea, who can tell, who know? All-seeing God
How Thou must mock or pity us! I prate
Of fuller knowledge, and all we hold is scarce
A drop out of Thy boundless ocean that—
With most, defiled with mud; stern limits set
Unto the wisest man's researches; the mind
Of Socrates himself imprisoned close
By ignorance. Laboriously we build
Our grave philosophies, as children pile
Their puny heaps of sand and shells, call this
A palace, that a fortress, till the sea,
With one lap of a lazy wave, wipes all
Away and makes the children's playground blank
And level as before. Let us not boast
Then of a certitude beyond the reach
Of finite mind, but humbly walk, with brow
Serene and steady foot, the path we know
Is good, the path of virtue and of truth.
To tread that path is all the God within
Demands of us; not to be there, in life
Or death, the only evil which subdues
The soul of man; and walking thus, as on
We move from deepest night to glimmering dawn,
Some time perhaps, for some of us the clouds
Will lift and through their broken multitudes

Will burst the grand Apocalypse of God!
Ah, not for me. My part is done for ever—
That pain again—its work now is soon ended.
Let no one importune the Gods with prayers
For my recovery. Behold I die
A royal death at duty's foremost post
Of danger, combating my country's foes.
I'm weary, friends; my soul, like to a bird
Upon the threshold of dim Night, would close
Its quivering wings and hush its wealth of music
Within the silence of untroubled rest.
Greet Rome, my Rome, for me when you return
To her from banishment, yea, greet her well,
And tell her how a Stoic Emperor dies.

Note to Pope Celestine V.

Celestine V. was Pietro the son of a peasant of Southern Italy. At the age of twenty he had joined the order of the Benedictines, and later retired into the mountains of Apulia, where he lived with a few other hermits who afterwards called themselves Celestines. In 1294 when he was already quite an old man his solitude was broken into by cardinals and archbishops requesting him to exchange his hermit cell for the papal throne. He refused at first, but when Charles II. of Naples and Andrew III. of Hungary joined their entreaties to those of the cardinals, he consented to accept the Tiara. He was, however, profoundly unhappy in his new surroundings, and after a little over two years, disgusted with the worldliness and intrigues rampant at the papal court, he resigned and fled back to his Apulian Mountain solitude. But his successor, Boniface VIII., fearing a schism, caused him to be arrested and thrown into prison, where he died on the 19th of May, 1294, at the age of eighty-one.

Pope Celestine V.

Ah, take it hence; release me from this crown,
Which with its treble weight of Earth and Heaven
And Hell in never opening circles binds
My brow. Remove it quite! My eyes are dim
With gazing on the pageantry of life
For fuller length of years than frail mortality
Can fitly bear. My weary footsteps faint
'Neath honours heaped upon me, honours borne
So badly they have turned to bitter shame.
Yet Lord! Thou knowest that I sought them not.
Not mine the fierce ambition that devours
And goads still upward over wrecks of loves,
And dreams and friendships till the topmost rung
Is reached, whence gazing down the world appears
The toy, the passive plaything of one being
Intoxicated with applause. Not mine
The hunger for the sunshine of this world,
Its blaze of pomp and power, wealth, renown.
I loved the cool sweet shade of humble life,
Embowered in peace and solitude, filled full
With grace, as cup of violet brims with dew.
And God had granted my desire. The deep
Seclusion of monastic vows bound fast
The placid current of my days, which knew
No other change, but that the sunrise breathed
"Orate," and the star, whose tremor crowns
The sunset glow, would whisper "Vigilate."
I never dreamed but that they still would glide,
Each like to each rounded with prayer, smooth
And still as rosary beads; would glide from dawn
To night, from night to dawn, in sacred, safe
Monotony even to the longest night
Of all. O vanity of human thought!
Ye came, ye whom I know not, ye whom hating
I never could have hurt as ye hurt me.
Ye broke the silence of my hermit's cell
With clash of worldly tongues and cares: "Be Pope!
"We cardinals have chosen thee." I heard,
But knowing God had not approved the choice,
I would not follow at your call. Then kings
Approached and knelt before me in the dust;
"Great Anchorite, we know thee pure and just,
"Without a stain. The Church is sick for dearth
"Of upright men like thee. Give her thy strength!
"What does it in this wilderness? Like gold,
"The miser hides and hoards, it yields mankind
"No fruit of joy. The Christian world hath need

"Of thee, the Christian world which for two years
 "In vain has clamoured for a Pope." With these
 And other reasonings they overwhelmed
 My hesitance, until perplexed, I half
 Believed the voice of God spoke with their tongues—
 I yielded, and they made me Pope. Yea Pope!
 O had ye known what force for good or ill
 Lies in that name, mayhap ye would have paused
 Before ye cast it thus away. Behold
 These old and trembling hands. Was't right to place
 Within their feeble grasp the keys of Hell
 And Heav'n? Was't just to call a helpless man
 The representative of Christ? What is
 This thing I call myself, that its least word
 To multitudes should be command, as though
 Decreed by God Himself? And ye who flaunt
 That rash assumption, know full well ye speak
 A lie. Do ye not daily seek to bend
 My sovereign power, that it may cringe and curve
 Along the dark and crooked paths which lead
 Unto the satisfaction of your own
 Ungodly aims? Blind leaders of the blind!
 My soul is sick with all this gorgeousness
 Of brodered vestments, jewelled mitres, clouds
 Of incense, crowds of officiating priests
 Who pray but for their own advancement; chants
 And services, lip-services, while through
 Them all, the spirit starves, the famished soul
 Faints unto death! Are ye the ministers
 Of God, ye who have even dared debase
 Repentance and remission of men's sins
 Into a market-thing to sell and buy?
 "And what of that? The papal treasury
 "Gets filled. The world's way."

True, perhaps, but I,
 Who fled the world in unmarred youth, abhor
 These ways and stumble in their tangled maze
 Of crookedness. O God! For one more breath
 Of thine own air that blows with strength of freedom
 Around my rock-bound wilderness: The sun
 At this last parting hour will flood the vale
 With heavenly light, and cast a radiant halo
 Around my wooden crucifix; and then
 When Night's unbounded stillness hath engulfed
 The lesser silence of the day, as streams
 Are lost within the mighty sea's embrace,
 The moon will rise and wed her virgin beauty
 Unto the mountains' majesty. My cell,

My lonely hermit's cell, my eagle's nest,
Perched up so high above the valley's clouds
And cares, which hears no sound but cry of birds,
And splash of crystal torrents bounding down
From rock to rock—let me return, O take
Me back unto my windswept mountain home,
Back, where the wearied soul can think and pray!
Ye shake your heads, ye frown—although ye need
Me not nor love. Do I not often hear
You whispering the name of my successor,
Whom everyone of you in secret strives
And longs to be? Vainhearted fools! I tell you,
Sackcloth should be the Pope's dalmatica,
The tiara should be made of thorns, that men
Like you, agape for gold and glittering pomp,
Should ne'er crowd into offices which saints
Alone can rightly fill. And I, no saint:
A foolish, weak and broken man, a tree
Transplanted in old age, which needs must fall
Because it cannot strike fresh roots. Well, well—
How I have talked—the shades of evening thicken;
In but a little, night outlines with black
The aureoles of the holy figures limned
Upon the chapel's glass. To vespers then,
Lord Cardinals, to vespers! From my soul
I'll murmur: *Nunc dimittis*, Lord, O Lord!"

A Woman's Face

Angels and demons once fought for her soul,
Harvests and ruins of years as they roll
Fell to her lot: adoration and shame,
Hunger and surfeit, sting of frost and of flame,
Starkindled dewdreams, thunderbolt flash,
Rapturous ecstasy, scorpion-tongued lash—
Of love in his passion lifted and caught her,
Life-force possessed her, made her and taught her,
Rent her and spent her! Of both now bereft,
Desolate, weary, alone she is left,
Dull as the stretch of the waterless shore.
Whose barren sands may exult never more
In whisper and welter and salt of the wave.
Athwart her brow blows the breath of the grave,
Cold flows her blood in her stiffening veins,
Pale are her pleasures, puny her pains,
The breast is withered, the hair fallen grey—
But the eyes remember what the lips may not say.

The Wreck of the "Aden"

'Tis upon us again, the force of the wave,
Foaming, ferocious, fathomless grave;
Cling for bare life to the slippery rail
Bent and twisted by rage of the gale,
Above us, beneath us, the bottomless sea,
Lord God of tempests, we cry unto Thee.

Thou alone O Lord, art refuge and stay,
The winds and the waves Thy power obey,
We are fainting with fear and horror and pain,
Who shall escape when the tide comes again?
Destruction looms hideous, our strength ebbs away,
Lord God of tempests, save us we pray.

We are Thy children; Thou madest us;
Have we sinned above others, to perish thus?
The billows are lashing and rending the deck,
We scarce still can cling to the quivering wreck,
Destroy not the life Thy providence gave,
Lord God of Tempests, save us, O save.

Have mercy upon us, hear us, O Lord,
Victim on victim is swept overboard,
Struggles an instant, shrieks and is drowned.
Haste Thee to succour, be no deaf to the sound
Of prayers for help! O horrible fear—
There is no God in the billows to hear.

Monstrous they roar, hungry-mouthed, cruel-lipped,
Voracious chasms to foam-pools whipped:
They care not, they know not whose lifeblood they
spill;
O mankind, with glory of reason and will,
Art thou so great then? Behold the blind sea,—
The fringe of its fury annihilates thee.

Cease then from prayer, give up the fight;
Though above the sea's strength rule a greater might,
Men are but creatures and things of a day,
For the forces of nature to bring forth and slay:
Tarry not, take us, huge bosomed wave,
Horrible, world wide, beautiful grave!

Sunset Off Sandy Hook

A bridge of gold
Of beauty untold,
Over ripples unrolled
 'Twixt the ship and the shore.

Over ripples just foaming
In blue of the gloaming,
Through which we are roaming
 In quest of the shore.

What would it forebode
To the wishes which goad .
Across the bleak road
 From cruel home-shore?

Are the waves less bitter,
As sunbeams they fritter
To sparkles which glitter
 On bright alien shore?

The sparkles which mould
The lithe bridge of gold
For Hope to unfold
 Her flight to the shore.

But the bridge is so frail,
And hope is so pale,
Will she not fail
 Before she reach shore?

Sea Nocturne

Stormclouds lifting and drifting,
Starlight radiant again,
Only away to the leeward
Dreariness, dimness of rain.

Waters open before us,
Folds of glimmering white,
Close—a faint hissing of bubbles,
Broken, submerged in the night.

Onward from shores forgotten
To harbours none of us know
We move 'twixt the waves' unfathomed
And the stars' unsearchable flow.

While in us ideals forsaken
And goals obscured arise,
And the wail of the whole world's sorrow
Through the Wet, through the Infinite cries.

How Shall We Live?

The Birds:

"How shall we live O Winter?
We filled the warm depths of the Summer
With resonance of our songs;
We caused its sunbeam-flooded skies to kindle
With winnowing of new-born wings;
Abundantly we took from Life,
And abundantly we gave.
But now—there is a stillness on the meadows,
And a coldness in the air—
How shall we live now, Winter?"

The Winter:

"O little children of the Summer,
What is this, that ye ask of me?
Is it not enough that ye have lived already,
Not enough, that high in Heaven
The music of your songs was heard,
That from your nests
A joyful multitude went forth?
Would ye exceed your destiny,
And linger on beyond the force
That made you?
My little children of the Summer,
I am Oblivion—I am Death!"

Prayers

The Masses.—"Give us the spacious halls, the sumptuous
board,
The cars, the ships, the jewellers' hoard,
Each joy and dalliance gold can buy!"

The Man. "Give me the sky!"

The Masses.—"Give us importance, power, titles, fame,
Make ours the envied, flattered name
Before which crowds obsequious bend!"

The Man. "Give me a friend."

The Masses.—"Spare us Thy thunder's battle strain,
Vouchsafe immunity from pain,
From clang of deathbells as they toll!"

The Man. "Give me the soul!"

The Shadow on the Dial

Beyond the shadow on the Dial,
Alternate change of dawn and dusk,
Shall we from opening of flowers
And closing of their withered husk,

Conceive the final Mystery,
Inscrutable to questionings,
The Impulse, Anguish or the Thought
Which moves and multiplies all things?

And shall our mind, which made Time's measure,
With what is measurelessly true
At last be crowned? Or on the Dial
Are we but phantom shadows too?

Birth Throe

Silence primeval in Time's folded coil
And Dimness lay, unwoken yet from sleep
Than Death's last slumber more profound and deep;
And Effort was not yet, nor strife and broil
Of creatures each to each destroyer or spoil,
And human souls were not to laugh or weep
And in the mirror of their thoughts to keep
The fragrance of all harvests of the soil,

Until Creation's dream enflamed that night;
And since the Silence dreamt of perfect sound,
And Dimness of the dazzling dawn of light,
The anguish of their yearning gathered round
Creation. Now, in each fresh birth her might
Brings forth, the pain of that first wound is found.

Retro Me Homine

O steep thy heart in roses,
Thy soul in song of birds,
Forget all human faces,
Unlearn all human words.

They do but moan and mutter,
Clubfooted, reft of wing,
Into their own mud trampling
The bounteousness of Spring.

They strangle life with phantoms:
"Thou shalt not, and thou must,"
Proclaim as law and virtue
Their twisted ropes of dust.

Too high for them thy Heaven,
Too luminous, too blue,
Too deep the well of gladness,
Whereto thy yearning flew.

Too wide thy breadth of vision,
Thy hearing all too keen,
Too infinite thy knowledge,
Thy sense of things unseen.

Thy liberty too dazzling,
Too perilous thy gains;
Slaves, born and bred in prison,
Their only faith is chains.

They make it shame and sorrow,
What should abound with grace—
The sound of human voices,
The sight of human face.

From theirs thy paths be severed,
Let these stand thee for words:—
The fragrance of wild roses,
The music of wild birds.

Nocturne

The day with all its trouble,
Is dying in the west,
E'en as a weary flower
The world droops into rest.

Great stars begin to glisten
And glimmer into sight,
So far, so faint, so perfect,
Like dreams dreamt in the night;

Like hope that draws together
Those whom the world would part,
Like love that longs and lingers
Unuttered in the heart.

Regret

O fragrance of dark violets that hung
An instant in the air, O music sung
Beneath the stars, O hallowed touch
Of human lips and human hands of such
Surpassing loveliness, until there rose,
From off the road of life, the dust which blows
On all that's sweet; the dust which spares but set,
Stern task and no companion but regret.

Cui Bono

What is toil
From gains forbidden?
What is day,
From which is hidden
Light?

What is hope
In worlds unbettered?
What is patience
Roughly fettered
To Despair?

What is sleep
By dreams forsaken?
What is life
From which is taken
Love?

For a Little

O come and tarry by my fireside,
The evenings are long and grey—
Thy voice is music in the twilight,
O for a little, come and stay!

I have been sad and passing weary
All through the hard, the lonely day—
Thy hand is soothing in the twilight,
O for a little, come and stay!

There is a world, the world knows nought of,
Beyond its envy hid away—
Deep in the silence of the twilight,
O my beloved, come and stay!

Among the Flowers

Among the flowers of the summer,
When first thy face appeared to me,
Through all the dreaminess of summer,
Among the flowers, I yearned for thee.

Among the thorns which Fate and hardness
Of thine own heart 'twixt thee and me
Still scattered for my feet to bleed on,
Among the thorns, I lived for thee.

Below the moss, the moss untrodden,
When I am nothing more to thee,
I shall be healed in dreamless slumber
From all the wounds thou gavest me.

Star Song

Far, so far,
Lonely star,
Hidden half
In a cloud,
Cloud as heavy
As a shroud.

Far, so far,
Beauteous star
Of the evening
Of my days,
All thy rays
Hidden quite
Out of sight
In the loneliness
Of night.

Wilt thou come
Once again,
Sweet as sunshine
After rain?
Bright as gleams
Through my dreams
In the loneliness
Of night

The remembrance
Of thy light,
Star, my star,
Now so far?

The Last Trek

Strike camp now boys, pack what biltong is left,
Load up the waggon; inspan the team, trek
To the North; you'll find the gold yet. I stop here,
I'm too done now to ride; the jolt in the waggon
Finished me up. Ye'd wait? Our stock's too low.
Leave me; 'tis best. I know what 'tis to be tied
To deadweights. Curse the whole lot. I'll not pay
This dirty world back in its own base coin.
There's a hell of pride ablaze in me yet. I lived
Alone; alone I shall die. Drop it, your pity.
Human pity's too close to contempt, Death
Ain't so dreadful looked square in the eye; the last
Pons Asinorum we've all got to cross.
I'm all right. But ye might just hitch up that blanket
A bit, and shift the pillow; my neck's kind
Of cricked. Here, take my watch—I've done with time.
My money, too—Don't spend it in drink. Then leave
Me here beneath the sky, so cool now, so calm,
He almost seems kind. And His stars and I
We'll have our last palaver out. Lor, how
They lied! Don't they twinkle like rogues? Maybe
My bearings were out; still I swear, that they vowed,
If only I always stuck to their lead,
They'd surely land me in Paradise. . . . They sink,
And I—well two hours still at most; a lame
Flat end to a thirty years' trek. Not even
A grave. You mustn't wait to shovel me in.
The birds can have me; they get hungry too.
To the last, I'd turn my eyes to the light. I'll get
My fill of the dark, had darkness enough.
The hells I've been through, the worries, the cares!
How I groused and cursed, prayed to Devils and Gods
I didn't believe in! It let off steam,
Was useful at that. Helped? Not much. Luck helps.
I used to fancy work did, honesty,
Patience, all that copybook stuff. It does—
For some. Some fellows score before they've bowled.
I lose my wicket for scarcely a run,
The bowling and batting ain't twice just alike,
The rules, too, differ in every man's game.
That makes it so hard. Still a hard game's good,
If only the Umpire always were fair.
He is? Bosh. Wait and play your deadlevel best
Through the blazing noon, then find yourself stumped
By the cowardly lie of a blackguardy cur—
Grousing, eh? Kind of foolish now, when all's

Too late. Ah well—it eased the pain in the chest
 Awhile. I won't deny I scored some too;
 Had some rattling good times, got Kudos and fun:
 Life's grand at its worst. Size up evil and good,
 They're plentiful both and much more akin
 Than parsons'd say. I've sampled most things, fruit
 Forbidden and lawful: there's wormwood in both,
 And ashes at last. That's why I went under?
 Rot. Look at that Jew swine. He's a success.
 He forged, embezzled, starved his brother to death,
 A wrong 'un right through; yet his wife's a shop
 Of Kimberly ware, his mistresses too.
 He'll soon be a lord. I worked—I am here. Luck,
 That's it. Fate's cruel? No. Just fond of gamblin'
 With loaded dice, and the Boss of the show,
 How he must laugh when a puppet's heartstring sudden
 Goes fut. Broken hearts not the fashion? That's so,
 But courage run dry, sheer physical strength
 Used up in the fight, pride and trust in one's work
 Clean gone, that ain't played out, that's brought me here
 Low in the thorns and dust of the veldt. What, grouching
 Again? Give us a drop then. Here's to you boys,
 Good luck, good luck. That's all there's in it:
 'Twent against me badly, but who cares now?
 Exceptin' the vultures—They'll find so little
 To pick off my bones. Hallo—there's the dawn:
 Twelve miles to cover before it gets hot.
 Time ye were off. Good bye, shake hands, though hands
 Mean little to me, since the one small hand
 I worshipped like God, slipped from my grasp and wounded
 Me most. What story's that? A secret? Yes.
 'Twill die with me, as a secret should. But you
 Are friends. True, capital friends, still there was
 An hunger in me you couldn't feed, a scar,
 The kindest touch would startle to pain. And so
 It's best as it is. It's all for the best.
 Any message to send? No, I'll not bother
 A soul. Death comes to all—life's last little joke,
 A good one perhaps. I'll know pretty soon,
 That's something—only—only—if I could
 First have done what 'twas in me to do.—Bad luck.

ASTRA

Catholicity

I worship in a temple of a thousand shrines;
Unto its portals lead a thousand roads,
And at the passing of a thousand winds
A thousand bells of gold begin to chime.

There are a thousand gods upon the altars
Veiled with a thousand shades and lights, adored
By murmur of a thousand prayers couched
In a thousand modes of speech. A thousand clouds
Of incense from a thousand silver censers
Swung from a thousand silver chains, float round
Them, and a thousand candles burn. Yet are
They all one God, my God, sometimes so close,
He seems myself; so far again, the faint
Trail of the Milky Way might be the breathing
Of His mouth. He has received a thousand names,
Yet is He nameless; a thousand shapes, yet hath
He none. He is the shadow of a dream,
The glamor of a rainbow on the void,
The elusiveness of music, breath profound
Of inspiration, fugitive delight
Of peace, whisper of infinitude, Man's
Apotheosis! And lo—He is the yearning
Of the dreamer, the anguish of the unattained,
The hunger and the sorrow of the soul.

I worship in a temple of a thousand shrines,
Unto its portals lead a thousand roads,
And at the passing of a thousand winds
A thousand bells of gold begin to chime.

The Solitary Column of Karnak

Lotus-crowned pillar! since thy leaves of stone
Were by an ancient sculptor raised on high,
Into thy calyx gazed no mortal eye:
Celestial orbs' undying rays alone
Now touch and gild thee, even like a throne,
From which the sad-browed queen—pale Memory—
Speaks to the constellations of the sky
Of things they shone upon—great things unknown
To all but them and thee, proud shaft!—Spell-bound
I linger near thee, till that symphony
Thou pourest forth, that music—where the sound
Of old Egyptian glories passed away
With yesterday's warm breath is interwound,—
Thrills through my soul in mystic harmony.

The Central Altar in the Temple of Heaven, Peking

Enduring verdure of tall cypress-tree,
Glazed lazuli of lustrous tiles deep wrought
Magnificence of alabasters brought
Together in concentric rows of three
Complete the glorious altar, wide and free
To every grandeur of the sky, with nought
Of roof or pillar to imprison thought
As upwards it exults, O Heaven, to Thee.

No dogma cult, no reverence of fear,
No graven image, no unworthy tear,
Insight alone of him who is a seer
Is suffered to officiate at this shrine
Whose perfect harmony of light and line
Creates on Earth, through Earth, the Soul Divine.

An Atlantic Liner

Water destroys man, space wearies his feet;
Yet space and water his mastery feel
O'erborne, o'erruled by swift forefoot and keel
Of the moving ship in whose engine room meet
Propeller and piston, bolt, rod, shaft and wheel,
Giant anatomy moulded in steel
With heart of fire and pulsation of heat.

Man's work alone! His the brain cell to scheme,
The supple hand to embody the dream,
The will no peril unconquered to leave,
Through all resistances progress to cleave,
Dead weight of iron, evanescence of steam
Curbed and compelled his behests to achieve.

Mount Everest

Alone, alone, deep-cushioned in the sky,
The long waves of Infinitude forever
Eddying around his brow, the height supreme
Of circling Earth in wide elliptic curve
Is swung through boundless space. He, first to seize
The quivering radiations flushed and flung
From that great cup of throbbing gold which brims
To overflowing with the intoxicating wine
Of light—the glorious Sun. He, last to plunge
Away from Day's transcendent crimson down
Into the liquid lazuli of Night;
There to commune unseen with magnetisms
In threads invisible spun from the stars;
The Chariot wheels above him, meteors flash
Their instant triumph past him through the void;
Oceans waft their longing towards him, dank trails
Of moisture poised, precipitated round
His crags in crystals of pellucid snow.
They cling to him, a crown of royal splendour,
Until the hungerpower of the deep
Drags them reluctant down with muttered roar
Of avalanche. Spring comes not unto him
Nor summer. Unbroken has he kept his faith
To Winter of remotest time. The fierce,
Keen cold of the abyss has bitten hard
Into his heart. No life, as we know life,
Invades his peace; but for the whirl of wind
And cloud all motion here were petrified.
And yet—when silver radiance of the moon
Impinges on the glimmering ice and quartz,
Who knows but that the mountain-summit's soul
Yearns not across the ether—dreaming, e'en
As all those silent things which we call dead,
In their stupendous loneliness may dream?

The Desert

Huge Desert, parched thy sand-drifts, and thy stones
Unfruitful; the secrets of beginnings, sad
With silences of ends, are sealed within
Thy soul. Waste thou art called and useless dust,
Because thy void to man's voraciousness
No harvest yields but pang of hunger, craze
Of thirst. Thou only hast triumphantly
Withstood the foul pollution of his yoke
Wherewith the earth is seared, till all her streams
Must turn his wheels, her quarried mountains bleed
Their ore, her forests fall to roof his hut.
But thou, O desert, art the watcher calm,
And final overwhelmer of his pride.
Thy sombre strength is like unto the strength
Of ultimate foundations. The burn and blaze
Of every sunbeam of the day thou takest,
And all the stinging iciness of night,
Untempered, unalloyed by veil of cloud
Or verdure, naked, proud, fierce, unafraid,
Hard to the very core of thee. The wind
Alone, whose wings, beyond the rolling globe,
Sweep the abysmal ether, may breathe on thee,
And mould the surface motion of thy sands;
But his force, too, sinks broken on thine heart
Unbreakable. So deeply hast thou drunk
Of death, forever now thou art immune.
Change, keenest despot of Creation, deals
Not with thee, and his relentless ally, Time,
Halts on the threshold of thy realm. Great Kings
Of old in thee have raised their sepulture,
And Empire-builders of to-day, near thee
Have craved to rest their bones. Thou mighty One,
Well-nigh eternal and immutable,
Home of the hermit, healer of the mind
Sore with the pettiness of human aims,
Mine, where the iron for the sure destruction
Of lying values of the crowd, has been
And ever shall be forged; thou simple One,
Light thy sole ornament, and Space, dread symbol
Of Infinity, lifeless, loveless, lone
And free; profoundest Dreamer of the far
To-morrow, of long forgotten yesterdays,
Art thou but soulless sand, or that strange thing
Inscrutable and unknown still, where matter
With seed of spirit-strength so teems, the two
Seem one, the spirit—child of matter, matter—
The mother, patient with a wayward child?

The Rain Cloud

With all the jewelry of rainbows girt,
Borne sheer above huge mountains on the wings
Of western winds, the cloud sheds down its wealth
Of moisture on the parched, the famished soil:
And lo the glory of the rainbow melts,
The very being of the fruitful cloud
Dies, dissolved, destroyed, devoured by that great deed
Of bounty, nourishing the famished soil.

The Sunset Cloud

Thou great and mellow evening cloud, uplifted
Into effulgence of the Sun, wast thou
The swiftly speeding surface of some strong
And restless stream, the storm-tossed foam of wild
Salt seas, the smoothly silent mirror
Of silver willows round a pond? Aflame
Now, kindled into ecstasy of light,
For one supreme and perfect consummation
No more a cloud; a dazzling incandescence,
A burning aureole of gold.

And then,
When night extinguishes thy splendour, Earth
Will draw thee back to her dark heart as dew,
And through the heaviness of shadows thou
Wilt whisper echoes of thine hour of gold.

Sanctuary

O gold of all the sunsets spilt, since Earth
Has first been sung to sleep; O silver stream
Of all the moons in midnight memories
Enshrined; O sweetness of the almond blossom
Swaying in the azure sky; O warmth benign
Of the comradeship of friends, ye are my home,
My happiness, my peace; the flame, the fragrance
And the flower in the dimness of the world,
The sanctuary across whose threshold hate
And anger may not pass, where Joy alone
Spreads wide the beauteous rapture of its wings;
Where obscure yearnings of creation swell
Into majesty of thought; where all that seemed
So separate, grows one, and all that seemed
So mortal—a symbol of Eternal Life.

Resurrection

They troubled the earth a little,
To hide a coffin away,
And sorrow wept there a little,
Then passed and faded away.

Now Earth is splendid with sunshine,
And strength and sweetness of spring,
From depths of her in the sunshine
Soft grass and violets spring

Yea everywhere through the sunshine
The resurrection of life,
Even where they hid from the sunshine
The pitiful waste of a life.

Evolution

Afar on the western horizon
Over fragrance of harvest-clad fields,
The sun his last flashing of crimson
In passionate ecstasy yields.
Darkness and dimness thicken,
But beyond the shadow—behold,
Effulgence of worlds without ending,
The Universe fashioned in gold.

Great worlds which are long extinguished,
And worlds which labour to grow
From vortex of nebular radiance,
Coalesce in one quivering glow,
Reveal what cannot be fathomed,
Dimensions thought cannot attain,
And distances wherein all measures
Of human experience fall vain;

Where Time is felt to be nothing
But Eternity as it revolves,
And Space the limit that ever
In the limitless dies and dissolves;
Where all that we deem so sure
Of verdicts of evil and right,
The standards and flags multi-coloured
Round which we struggle and fight;

Shrink to fables stammered by children,
And Heaven itself seems a sigh
Of weariness, far too mortal
To span that splendour on high,
That Power, which riots and revels
In restlessness, struggle and strife,
Whose Nadir is death and destruction,
Whose Zenith is Progress and Life.

Benedicite Ver

The Spring, the Spring!
Bless ye the Spring!
His breath is Beauty,
His lips are Love,
His eyes a Glory
A blessing his hands,
Fruitfulness marketh the path of his feet.
Spring is a poem written by God,
His bounty's apocalypse,
The heavenly harmony angels sing,
The angels who dwell in the heart of all things,
The angels, who render this earth so fair,—
Bless, bless ye the Spring!

Spring

Fling to me violets,
Bring to me May,
Cling to me sunshine,
Sing to me birds,
Ring to me royally blue-bell chime
Spring! I am Spring! the life kindling time!

Birds

By the brink of the lake,
Where leaves are so green,
And the sky and its blueness
Can scarcely be seen,
The birds are calling, are calling.

Over waters asleep,
Just rippled by leap
And silverswift splash
Of fishes which flash,
The birds are calling, are calling.

Twixt grasses of summer,
From flower to flower,
Through golden green twilight
Of drowsy noon-hour,
The birds are calling, are calling.

In thicket half-hidden,
On branches on high,
With bright-coloured wing
Spread wide 'gainst the sky,
The birds are calling, are calling.

And surely thou knowest
The sweet sounding name
My lips in soft cadence
To their love song would frame,
As the birds are calling, are calling.

Summer Harvest

It rose the first promise of springtide,
It grew with the growth of the days,
It gathered into its greenness
All the gold and the glory of rays;

It rippled in glittering sparkles
With the laughing gladness of light;
It breathed in tremulous whispers
'Neath the passionate darkness of night;

It fed on the heat of the sunshine;
It drank of the coolness of rain,
And now it is cut down and gathered—
The straw and the chaff and the grain;

It is piled up in tall sheaves of plenty,
The wage wherewith Summer and soil
Reward in bounteous profusion
The sweat of the labourer's toil.

And I who have toiled not nor laboured,
Who idled through long summer days,
Who breathed the scent of wild flowers
Who roamed over untrodden ways,

Who tasted strange fruit, sweet and bitter;
Who have culled so much pleasure and pain,
Now 'tis come the time of the harvest:
I must count the loss and the gain.

The Reckoning Angel is standing
Where autumn mists cover my path;
Will the depths of his eyes smile in favour,
Or frown upon me in wrath?

Is there aught in my hands save the stubble
And chaff to be burnt into dust?
Have I gathered but worldly treasure
For the thief, and the moth and the rust?

Nay! Behold of these it is empty,
My summerdays' harvested store;
I have reaped a heavenly treasure—
The soul of one friendship the more!

Sic Transit

Just a falling to seed among flowers,
A tinge of gold in the leaves,
And the wheat, where the warm winds rippled,
Gathered up into motionless sheaves.

Just a darkening of the shadows,
A gradual waning of light,
A deepening and a prolonging
Of the exquisite coolness of night;

Just a lingering in soft hollows
Of the diamond sparkle of dew,
A pearly and delicate veiling
Of the luminousness of the blue.

The summer seems sweeter than ever,
Thus pierced with the sting of decay,
If Death is always so tender,
Why murmur when passing away?

Though It Be Death

Sheer on the snow exultant day:
Beneath the ardor of his breath,
To sparkle like the sun's own ray
Is it not joy though it be death?

Thus on my mouth thy lips' strong seal:
Beneath the fervor of thy breath
The loss of my whole soul to feel,
Is it not life though it be death?

To a Young Girl

Red the bright beads of thy necklace,
Red the tissue of thy dress
Red thy cheek's and mouth's soft outline,
White thy maiden loneliness.

Red the flicker of the firelight,
Where midst dancing of the flame,
And faint dropping of the embers,
Thou dost read the far one's name;

Where thine eyes aglow with laughter
Of the child unused to fears,
Darkening though with dim foreboding
Of the woman's bitter tears,

Seem to see with keener brightness
Than the keen delight and strife
Of red flametongues round the firewood,
Red the reddest rose of life.

And a wonder steals upon thee,
And a yearning and a dread
Lest some day between thy fingers
It should lie discrowned and dead,

Lest of all its wealth of fragrance,
All its promise, all its lure,
Some day nothing but the sorrow
And the heartache should endure.

Fear not child: Love's root lies deeper
Than the flowering of one May,
Something to thy soul' is added
For each petal blown away.

Thou art one of those who kindle,
From the dawning of their birth,
With the joyfulness of beauty
All the misery of earth;

Who from height of their ideals
Heaven's glory round us shed:
White thy gentle soul forever,
Red thy soft lips, warm and red.

To Ruth

Could I pluck from the sun its heart of gold,
From virgin mines their treasures untold,
And then in figurings lavish and bold
Upon the canvas glowing unfold
This magic wealth, would it half be told
With all the splendour and radiance there,
Wherein amber, ruby and topaz share,
The exquisite sheen of thine auburn hair?

Immortality

I dreamed I had been dead a thousand years,
And that the wastage of a thousand years
Had been piled up upon my grave. The leaves
And grasses of a thousand summers had drawn
The sweetness from the upper air, and down
Through mellow transformations they had drifted
To nourish roots of trees struck straight through mould
And mildew of my sunken coffin-lid,
The coffin planks disjoined, dissolved, dropped back
To dimness inorganic. All my bones
Denuded from the ligaments of flesh
But crumbling heaps of bloodless dust. I was
No more a thing apart, but soil of soil
And clay of clay, absorbed, and yet endowed
With wondrous senses, seeing, without eyes
In darkness, hearing without ears, in silence,
Feeling without hands, in isolation.
Being wholly dead, I was immortal. Change,
Decay, disintegration, phantoms pale
Of dream-lost days; the prison consciousness
Of self with putrefaction of the flesh
Destroyed; the unfolding of Eternity
Through Time thenceforth my sole pulsation; peace
Of knowledge absolute, my only thought;
The might and dark magnificence of that
Whereon destruction dies, my godlike soul!

I dreamed I had been dead a thousand years
And that the harvests of a thousand years
Had weighed and slowly wasted on my grave.



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